

## RELUCTANT BULLIES: CHINESE AND AMERICAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

BY

COLONEL KENNETH M. PETERSON  
United States Army

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U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**RELUCTANT BULLIES: CHINESE AND AMERICAN STRATEGIC CULTURE**

by

Colonel Kenneth M. Peterson  
United States Army

Dr. Paul R. Kan  
Project Adviser

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013



## **ABSTRACT**

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## RELUCTANT BULLIES: CHINESE AND AMERICAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

The ancient Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu famously notes that the requirement for any military practitioner seeking battlefield success is to “know” both himself and the enemy. Although Sun Tzu likely intended this advice primarily for military leaders, it seems plausible that its value extends to the grand strategic thought of state leadership. The operative word in this maxim is “know”. Knowing is an especially critical skill when national leadership considers the most important decision, when and how to initiate war. The decision to use force to achieve national objectives carries with it the potentially high cost in lives, resources, and the very existence of the state. The ability of one culture to really know another, regardless of homogeneity, is at best limited. The challenge is to understand and subsequently determine how the dominant cultural identity and beliefs of a state or group influence its leadership’s decisions and behavior regarding the use of force. This is often referred to as strategic culture.<sup>1</sup>

The intent of this work is threefold. First, to argue that strategic culture of states and groups does exist and influences strategic behavior. Second, to examine the strategic cultures and behaviors of the Peoples’ Republic of China (referred to henceforth as China) and the United States and observe the recent history of conflict between the two. Finally, to offer broad recommendations for how U.S. policymakers might best leverage a basic understanding of the respective strategic cultures when crafting Sino-US policy and strategy.

What is strategic culture? Theorists have offered many definitions most slightly nuanced in their approach. For instance, Andrew Scobell defines it as “the fundamental

and enduring assumptions about the role of war (both interstate and intrastate) in human affairs and the efficacy of applying force held by political and military elites in a country.”<sup>2</sup> Scobell notes the importance of strategic cultural images, or what one state believes about another state’s strategic culture, as a significant influence on behavior.<sup>3</sup> Alastair Johnston offers that strategic culture possesses two basic elements. The first a “central paradigm” that answers questions related to the general nature of conflict in human affairs, the nature of the adversary, and the efficacy of violence.<sup>4</sup> The second element is derived from how state elites and decision makers interpret that paradigm and is represented by a dominant set of national strategic preferences regarding the use of force.<sup>5</sup> While Scobell and Johnston have focused the majority of their efforts regarding strategic culture on the study of China, Brice Harris has addressed his definition in the context of his work on U.S. strategic culture. He notes that strategic culture captures a state’s cognitive (thoughts resulting from shared values, traditions, and experiences), behavioral (social habits and traditions), and communicative (symbols, codes, languages) aspects of force and violence to achieve certain ends.<sup>6</sup> Another U.S. strategic cultural examiner, F.G.Hoffman, further defines it as the confluence of the established and distinct sub-cultural political, social, and military viewpoints existing within a state. Although all of these definitions take slightly different approaches to strategic culture, it’s notable that their similarities far outnumber their differences. For the purpose of this examination, we will align most closely with Scobell’s definition with its dual focus on the role of a state’s collective view of war as part of human relations (know yourself) and the role a strategic cultural image on

behavior (know your enemy). Further examination reveals the prominent role both play throughout the history of Sino-U.S. relations and conflicts.

### Does Strategic Culture really Influence Behavior?

Since the Cold War, the debate among theorists over the relative worth of strategic culture has intensified. Strategic culture detractors often point out that there is often a large gap between what a state's leaders say they believe and what those nations actually do regarding the use of force. Some critics posit that strategic culture is really group myths or legends and relegate it to what groups and their leaders want to believe about themselves rather than who they really are. According to Reginald C. Stuart this is particularly clear when examining the general pacifist self-image of the American people and the frequency with which America chooses to use force to resolve conflicts.<sup>7</sup> Some detractors subscribe to a Realist school of thought suggesting that national leaders are for the most part slave to the rational pursuit of logical national interests, or Realpolitik. Patrick Porter asserts that the impact of culture on strategic behavior is limited; culture serves as a complex mixture of competing ideas that can be selectively manipulated to justify decision making, but does not provide a clear strategic preference.<sup>8</sup> He further cautions that "by depicting culture as a unitary force that drives behavior, we may oversimplify the relationship between culture and action, and damage our ability to watch people acting strategically."<sup>9</sup>

Strategic culture proponents often point to historical examples and national patterns of aggression as evidence of the true influence of strategic behavior, especially when the use of force did not support the most efficient achievement of national interests. Jeffrey Legro examined the different approaches to submarine warfare against merchant shipping, the employment of air power against civilians, and the use

of chemical weapons during the Second World War. He argues that culture served to constrain use and encourage cooperation between some combatants, either completely or for periods of time, despite the logical efficacy of the application of unconstrained force to achieve victory and ensure state survival.<sup>10</sup> Alastair Johnston's summary for proponents of strategic culture posits that different sets of state leaders from different strategic cultures would consistently make very different choices regarding the use of force. When faced with identical circumstances (ends and means), pure adherence to the logic of Realpolitik would dictate similar choices (ways). However, the influence of strategic culture fosters a much wider range of behaviors.<sup>11</sup>

This examination proceeds under the premise that strategic culture does consistently influence strategic behavior. However, it seems clear that within every state a constant psychological struggle persists between what the state wants to be and what the state needs to be in order to survive and thrive in the contemporary international environment. The result of this internal struggle determines when and how nations fight. Nations cannot divorce themselves from their ideological and historical roots, but they also cannot afford to sacrifice vital state interests in deference to a strategic culture that shuns war as a preferred tool to achieve required ends. In any case, great powers like the U.S. and China could initiate the application of overwhelming and uninhibited force during times of crisis, but rarely do so. To understand why requires further examination of their respective strategic cultures.

### China's Strategic Culture

China's strategic culture has followed a much longer evolutionary path than that of the U.S. The considerable history of China's use of force provides a lengthy and sometimes complex track record for examination of strategic cultural traits. Two themes

emerge when considering the extensive body of work regarding China's strategic culture. One is that China is torn between an ancient cultural self-identity of pacifism and a pragmatic realization, attendant to China's emerging economic and military power, of the potential benefits of employing force to achieve ends. Another theme is that recent Chinese history is also one of traumatic foreign occupation and exploitation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, altering China's strategic culture by lowering the threshold for just war.

Modern China possesses a clear and vibrant cultural connection to its ancient past. This is especially true of the significant influences of Confucius and Mencius. Xia Liping notes that Chinese philosophy and tradition is based on the concept of harmony between people and values peace despite differences. Specifically, Confucian philosophy prizes benevolence, propriety, morality, and love.<sup>12</sup> Zhang Junbo and Yao Yunzhu add that traditional Chinese philosophy guide the individual's pursuit of the perfect inner world and explore and explain human behavior in an ethical framework.<sup>13</sup>

Scobell offers that consistent references to this traditional Confucian approach to human relations permeate the speech of China's contemporary civilian and military leadership and helps to describe "the extreme degree" that contemporary Chinese elite believe that China is "uniquely pacifist".<sup>14</sup> Scobell further describes the development of a dualistic Chinese strategic culture that is influenced by its Confucian identity, one that is averse to conflict and defensive in nature, yet infused with a pragmatic realism that does not exclude the offensive use of force, seeing it as a valuable tool to achieve national ends. Both of these identities consciously influence Chinese decision making regarding when, where, and how to employ force.<sup>15</sup>

Conversely, Johnston's study of Chinese strategic culture during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) leads him to a slightly different conclusion. Although he acknowledges the clear existence of a collective Chinese Confucian pacifist identity, he relegates this identity to the status of mythology and rejects the notion that it has any significant influence on Chinese decisions regarding the use of force in the contemporary strategic environment. Instead he suggests that Chinese leaders consistently and consciously manipulated this mythology to justify the use of force to the Chinese populace in culturally acceptable ways. To Johnston, Chinese pacifism is not at all unique. China simply follows the practical pursuit of national interests in the same way as other powerful nations do.<sup>16</sup>

The oft-cited Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu plays a constructive role in shaping the theoretical reconciliation of the essentially peaceful nature of Confucianism and the inherently violent nature of force. A strong connection exists between Sun Tzu's work and the Confucian teachings of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. Notably, Samuel Griffith describes Sun Tzu's theories as based on "benevolence and righteousness" and recommending of strategies that employ force to gain victory in the shortest time with the fewest casualties suffered by both the victorious and defeated armies.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond Sun Tzu, the broader linkages between Ancient Chinese philosophy regarding spirituality and humanity and Chinese approaches to the use of force are clear. Zhang Junbo and Yao Yunzhu summarize this point more directly by stating "From the ancient Chinese point of view, war represented more of a confrontation of wisdom than a force between two opposing sides."<sup>18</sup> They additionally point to the history of Chinese military tradition as emphasizing justice over interests with a strong

tendency to hail the moral winner and rebuke the moral loser. The authors cite examples from the Warring States Period (770-221 B.C.) including Zhou Wu's seizure of power from a lawful but oppressive King and his subsequent benevolent reign. Chinese philosophers and scholars of the time stressed the punishment of the immoral or preservation of ethical codes as the preeminent justification for war and regularly condemned material pursuits as illegitimate war aims.<sup>19</sup> Mencius, Confucius' most famous student, noted that the overthrow of tyranny was the aim of a justifiable war.<sup>20</sup>

Any Chinese strategic cultural proclivity to avoid offensive use of force is certainly tempered by the acknowledgement of force as a viable tool for an economic and military power to achieve ends. Johnston indicates that this has held true even in Ancient China. His examination of the Ming Dynasty reveals that some ancient Chinese strategists pragmatically concluded that force was often the best way to eliminate threats provided enough force was available to ensure success. If not, they recommended negotiation and the employment of other non-coercive means until they could assemble enough military capability for the successful use of force.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese monarchy that endured from 221 B.C. to A.D. 1911 came into being only through the application of brutal force by the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty to bring about unification. This arguably initiated a very long tradition of Chinese leaders choosing force to maintain internal and external order.<sup>22</sup> The resultant frequent infighting eventually weakened the monarchy and created the conditions for foreign interference.

China's use of force as a primary security tool has persisted. A study of Chinese foreign policy crises from 1929-1979 suggests that contemporary Chinese strategic culture is predisposed to use force over more peaceful conflict resolution options.

China experienced 13 crises during that period and resorted to the use of force in 10 of those cases. Additionally, China employed relatively high intensity violence (from serious clash to full scale war) in nine of those cases.<sup>23</sup> Since the rise to power of the Communist party in China, Chinese strategic behavior has become increasingly more pragmatic. Suisheng Zhao notes that although Chinese behavior under Mao Zedong was influenced by communist ideology, China's foreign policy and behavior since the shift to economic modernization that began in the late 1970s are driven more and more by pragmatism and realism.<sup>24</sup>

The Chinese shift towards realism was further accelerated by the stunning U.S. military success in 1991 during Operation Desert Storm, which directly challenged the traditional Chinese faith in the increased value of the human element of war over the technological elements (people over weapons). This resulted in the start of a comprehensive transformation and modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) that continues today.<sup>25</sup> The author further states "more and more Chinese analysts have downgraded ideological and moral factors in favor of national interests in international relations".<sup>26</sup> University of California, Berkeley educated Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong reinforces this trend in Chinese strategic thinking by simply stating that "Attaining national interests depends on power. Without power, achieving national interests can only be a beautiful dream."<sup>27</sup>

The legacy of foreign occupation, influence, and exploitation of China during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries encroaches upon the pacifistic aspects of China's strategic culture and further served to accelerate a more pragmatic view of the role of force in state security. It is instructive to examine this period in more detail in order to provide



proper context for contemporary Chinese attitudes towards sovereignty, nationalism, and strategic culture. Commonly referred to by China as “the century of shame and humiliation”, China suffered a series of humbling defeats and foreign occupation. The Chinese monarchy’s opposition to the spread of narcotics precipitated The First Opium War with Great Britain in 1839 over import and control of the drug. The decisive British victory in 1842 initiated the slow and steady decline of the Chinese monarchy.<sup>28</sup>

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and the U.S. took advantage of a weak Chinese monarchy and established significant spheres of influence throughout China.<sup>29</sup> Chinese nationalism began to express itself more vigorously against foreign influence in the country most famously during the foreign suppression of the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1901).<sup>30</sup> The loss of the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) led to the final fall of the monarchy during the Xinhai Revolution (1911-12).<sup>31</sup> In 1919 the large demonstrations of the May Fourth Movement symbolically advanced the cause of nationalism after the Versailles conference formally ending World War I gave control of the Shandong province to Japan, despite China’s support of the Allied powers during the war.<sup>32</sup> China suffered brutal treatment at the hands of Japan during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45) most notably suffering unspeakable atrocities during the Nanjing massacre in 1937.<sup>33</sup>

The instability that marked the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in China led to the rise of the eventual rivals of the Chinese Civil War that marked the end of the “Century of Shame and Humiliation”. Sun Yat-sen and his military chief Chiang Kai-shek established the Kuomintang. May Fourth Movement leaders Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao

co-founded the Chinese communist movement and eventually gave way to their military chief Mao Zedong.<sup>34</sup> Over 100 years of nearly continuous foreign domination made a profound impact on China's strategic culture and provides some context for the sensitivity, referred to by some as paranoia, of contemporary Chinese leadership in the Communist era regarding territorial and political sovereignty.

What does this mean in the contemporary strategic environment? James Townsend asserts that three broad themes have emerged in the "kaifang" or opening of China since the reforms initiated in earnest by Deng Xiaoping during the late 1970s: interdependence, sovereignty, and nationalism.<sup>35</sup> As mentioned earlier, both Scobell and Johnston assert that modern China possesses a dualistic strategic culture featuring both a pacifistic defensive identity rooted in ancient culture as well as a Realpolitik identity that understands the utility of force to achieve national interests in the contemporary operating environment. These previously discussed factors have combined to form what Scobell describes as the Chinese Cult of Defense. This strategic cultural feature influences Chinese leadership to employ offensive force to achieve or secure national interests, while characterizing those actions as defensive in nature and the least preferred option.<sup>36</sup> In order to recover from the "Century of Humiliation and Shame", China's leadership subconsciously co-opt the legacy of Chinese defensive minded pacifism, prudence, and just war in order to use force in active defense of Chinese sovereignty. China maintains a robust capability to wage war and appears willing to demonstrate that capability in order to coerce and deter perceived adversaries. However, China's traditional pacifist nature still serves to govern or limit China's actual

application of force as evidenced by the long break in significant combat operations since 1979.

### U.S. Strategic Culture

For a nation so young in the relative terms of human history, much has been written about the strategic culture of the U.S. In 1957 Samuel Huntington described the prevailing American view of war as rooted in a liberal ideology dominant in American political thinking from the nation's birth through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This liberalism was teamed with a fundamentally conservative U.S. Constitution that was specifically designed by its authors to disperse power across the federal government.<sup>37</sup> Former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger noted that the design of the American democracy mandates a broad diffusion of power across the branches of government, more so than in any other major world power. This unique attribute significantly impacts the military establishment.<sup>38</sup>

Huntington goes on to describe an "American ambivalence toward war" that encompassed an extremist approach to force born out of liberalism. One American nature rejecting war because liberal ideology contends that violence is an aberration and that rational men should peacefully resolve differences. The other American nature embraced a brand of idealistic nationalism, and viewed war as a necessary crusade to protect liberal ideals. These crusades were not for limited national interests but rather to protect grand principles like self-determination or freedom of the seas. Huntington asserts that "Indeed, for the American a war is not a war unless it is a crusade".<sup>39</sup> This form of uniquely American nationalism espoused the superiority of American ideals, not the superiority of the American people.

The ambivalence also manifests in a cyclical nature as the often broad ideological goals of crusade type wars are rarely achievable in total. American history is marked with periods following wars of great disillusionment with the use of force and a subsequent return to liberal pacifist tools to fix the problems. Examples include anti-imperialism following the Spanish-American War, isolationism and disarmament conferences, and the Neutrality Acts following World War I, and endorsement and membership in the United Nations following World War II. However, when these liberal functions subsequently fail to protect our ideological interests, America reverts to the crusade.<sup>40</sup>

Colin Gray offers a nuanced twist of the traditional liberalist view of early American strategic culture. American strategic thought was retarded or stunted from the colonial period through the end of World War II because complex American strategic thought was simply not required. The near total security resulting from a lack of any consistent external military threats, emerging industrial and economic preeminence, and an immigrant population looking to avoid entangling their new home with the affairs of their nations of origin, combined with the previously noted American Nationalism rooted in liberal ideological beliefs to form an internally focused behemoth. America would intervene with force only to ensure that good triumphed over evil. Generally speaking, American abundance precluded the need to think long and hard about when and where to use force. U.S. military capability mirrored this thinking by shunning the development of large professional armies and instead relying on the ability to summon huge conscript armies for required crusades.<sup>41</sup>

Conversely, Reginald Stuart diverges from this view regarding early American liberalism and asserts that early American strategic culture was influenced by a Clausewitzian “limited war mentality”. Wars were to be fought only to redress critical grievances (like the American Revolution) or the establishment of peace.<sup>42</sup> The “American War Myth” emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century until the age of nuclear weapons. This generally accepted belief held that America was humanity’s best chance for peace and freedom, therefore any American use of force to expand its influence was justified as ultimately beneficial or a “humane extension of civilization”.<sup>43</sup> National ambition, an enhanced sense of national security, and a measure of self-righteousness contributed to this American self-image of crusading pacifism despite actual strategic behavior that indicated otherwise. America fought many small wars to obtain limited interests under the pretense of defending American ideals and territory.<sup>44</sup>

Russell Weigley joins Stuart in the American Clausewitzian realism camp but in a more direct way. He asserts that America pursued a form of limited objective attrition warfare during early development in the post revolutionary period. However, the U.S. evolved to adopt and pursue Clausewitz’ absolute form of annihilation warfare. This in support of America’s idealistic crusading nature and enabled by unparalleled economic vitality and security.<sup>45</sup> This fits the model of a state reluctant to resort to force, but willing to employ it as a last resort to decisive ends. Think of the uniquely American terminology of unconditional surrender and regime change as descriptors for this pursuit of an absolute form of war.

Similar to the impact the “Century of Shame and Humiliation” had on Chinese strategic culture, strategic cultural theorists generally agree that the advent of the

nuclear age significantly altered American strategic culture. The Cold War changed the American view of war and reinvigorated the notion of limited war.<sup>46</sup> The prospect of mutual destruction forced America to eventually more fully embrace the view that small wars to achieve limited ends are both useful and required. Thinking more broadly, Gray notes the emergence of two additional central security themes developed during the 1950s and 1960s that paired with the limited war theme to fundamentally changed American strategic culture. Deterrence required near wartime readiness during times of peace in the new bi-polar nuclear age. For the first time in its history, the U.S. was required to maintain large and expensive capability and continued professionalization of the military. America could no longer rely solely on summoning large conscript armies to fight the new crusade. The pursuit of arms control required America to establish or expand multi-lateral and bi-lateral alliances and treaties. This included the repugnant notion of making deals with “evil” states openly hostile to the concept of the preeminence of American ideals of democracy and freedom. Heretofore, U.S. strategic culture was averse to foreign entanglement.<sup>47</sup>

In the end, contemporary U.S. strategic culture is as complex as the nation it represents and defies characterization as purely liberal or Realist. Like China’s, American strategic culture is dualistic. It remains in a state of perpetual struggle between a dovish self-image of idealistic pacifism that believes war is just only in the defense of good against evil, and a hawkish nature that acknowledges that preeminent American power consistently offers the opportunity to achieve state ends by use of force. In essence, American strategic culture fosters similar behavior to Chinese strategic culture in that it justifies the use of force in the defense of ideals instead of in

defense of territory or sovereignty. U.S. leaders understand that the oft-touted “will of the people” is code for the strategic cultural judgment of the justness of the war in question.

Although understanding the way China and America view themselves is crucial in understanding the influence of strategic culture on strategic behavior, it is also important to understand their strategic cultural images of each other. Zhang Junbo and Yao Yunzhu provide some insight into how Chinese leaders might broadly view Western (not specifically American) approaches to the use of force. The authors note trends in ancient Western history and writings that highlight interests over justice as acceptable causes for war. Homer’s description of romantic personal interests in the Trojan War and Thucydides’ account of the role that economic interests played in the Peloponnesian War are cited as examples. Western classics regularly point to material and human gains as acceptable aims of war. An examination of western philosophical tradition brings to light mankind’s unique superiority over the world, a desire to know and dominate all things external to mankind, and measurement of achievements by what has been gained from the external. Western views of warfare have historically valued weapons over humans as evidenced by the record of western innovation in weapons technology to include the use of iron, warships, airplanes, and space technology.<sup>48</sup>

Scobell presents a possible Chinese strategic culture image specific to America. He describes a geographical and ideological hegemony lacking in ethical and moral codes. America seeks conflict through offensive use of military force, “worships” technology over people, and seeks to leverage its significant technological advantages

against an inferior opponent. Additionally, the U.S. consistently engages in strategic deception and therefore cannot be trusted. All these factors contribute to an overall view that the U.S. is intent on controlling or limiting China in a strategic sense. Significant weaknesses in U.S. strategic culture in the Chinese view include strategic inconsistency, as American politics dictate significant swings between liberal and Realist approaches. This severely limits the U.S. in developing any coherent long-term strategies. One could argue that this is a reasonable interpretation based on this work's previous description of a dualistic U.S. strategic culture. The Chinese view also holds that America and its leaders are almost completely ignorant regarding world culture and history outside of their own resulting from an arrogance that relegates such understanding as irrelevant.<sup>49</sup>

Since the ascension of Communism to Chinese state leadership in 1949, the U.S. has developed a strategic cultural image of China as an emerging but paranoid expansionist power intent on reclaiming its role as a leading world power. China is eager to assert itself in Asia, by aggressive use of force if necessary, in order to become a regional hegemony at the expense of U.S. allies, partners, and influence. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, demonization of China as the next great rival to U.S. global dominance has become almost commonplace. The significant level of recent economic interdependence coupled with tremendous advances in the capability and scope of China's military have served to make many American observers of China especially uncomfortable. Particularly troublesome to many U.S. strategists is the lack of Chinese transparency regarding military development that is regularly cited in support of the prevailing American view of China as an aggressor. Recent American strategic



policy documents seem to underscore contemporary American discomfort with China. U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted in 2008 that "...we will need to hedge against China's growing military modernization and the impact of its strategic choices upon international security".<sup>50</sup> In order to properly consider the potential way forward in the Sino-U.S. strategic relationship, it is perhaps useful to briefly examine the history of Sino-U.S. conflict since 1949.

### Sino-U.S. Conflicts and Strategic Culture

Sino-U.S. conflict began almost immediately following the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, partly because the U.S. continued to recognize the Nationalist government of the Republic of China in Taiwan to the exclusion of the Communist government on the mainland. Early confrontations in Korea (1950-53), Taiwan (1954-55, 58), and indirectly during the First Indochina War (1946-54) all have roots with strategic cultural blind spots. When framed in the context of strategic cultural identities and images, it becomes clear that mutual strategic cultural ignorance played a significant role in Sino-U.S. conflict.

American forces were sent to Korea in 1950 to "save" that nation from communism and deter the spread of Soviet and Chinese influence in Asia. The proximity of American forces to the Chinese border in 1950 resulted, after significant internal debate, in Chinese military intervention.<sup>51</sup> China intervened in Korea to spoil a perceived U.S. invasion of China and ensure that a buffer existed on the Korean peninsula between China's border and a South Korea subject to U.S. influence.

Following the 1953 ceasefire in Korea, China assumed that increased American military support of Taiwan was a precursor to invasion from another front, since the perceived incursion from Korea had failed. China viewed several small islands located

very close to the mainland and garrisoned by Taiwanese military personnel as potential staging bases for an American led invasion intended to reinstall the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>52</sup> Significant U.S. increases in military support for Taiwan in 1954 heightened this perception. For its part, America, fearing perceived Chinese intentions to spread communism throughout Asia, was conducting military activities in Taiwan that were actually intended to deter China from reinitiating hostilities in Korea and intervening in Indochina.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, China attacked several small islands in 1954, the conflict ending only with a threat of a U.S. nuclear response.<sup>54</sup> A similar scenario with similar results played out again in 1958.

Both China and America engaged in forms of proxy wars in Indochina starting in the mid 1950s. China, fearing invasion from the south, provided significant support to communist forces in Vietnam against the French and later Americans. America, fearing the fall of another part of Asia to the forces of Communism, essentially bankrolled French resistance to communist incursion in their colony and subsequently provided direct military support to South Vietnam after the capitulation of the French. Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson slowly increased the amount of U.S. support in Vietnam during the 1950's and 1960's. President Kennedy, in concert with the liberal nature of America's dualistic strategic culture, believed it was America's destiny to defend and spread democratic ideals in the face of communist oppression. He appealed to America's crusading nature by calling on the American people to be "the watchmen on the walls of freedom".<sup>55</sup> China, true to its dualistic strategic nature of territorial sensitivity and internal security, resisted U.S. activity in Vietnam in order to secure its southern border. Additionally, the conflict provided a convenient external rallying point to

secure internal support of the Chinese populace and facilitate stringent domestic policies.<sup>56</sup>

Shu Guang Zhang argues that a lack of basic cultural understanding contributed to Sino-U.S. conflicts of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. China did not understand the American self-image as a sea faring state, with the maintenance of maritime standoff (oceans dividing U.S. from threats) and open Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCS) critical to ensuring national security. Resultantly, China misread U.S. military operations in Asia that were actually focused on opposing foreign domination of maritime global commons, as a direct threat to Chinese territory and sovereignty.<sup>57</sup> In fact, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations never seriously considered using offensive force on mainland China to unseat the Communist regime.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, Chinese leaders misread the liberal crusading nature of U.S. strategic culture that practically mandated American military responses to any Chinese support of communist movements in Korea and Vietnam.

Conversely, China's people and leaders viewed themselves as a land power emerging from a century of struggle against foreign invasion. As such, territorial integrity and national autonomy defined their security interests. Chinese leaders viewed U.S. activity as a provocative "three front" threat, believing the U.S. would invade China from Korea, Taiwan, or French Indochina.<sup>59</sup> American leaders lacked sufficient understanding of these dominant Chinese strategic cultural traits and were subsequently surprised by Chinese military responses to the perceived threat posed by U.S. military activities so close to China's borders in Korea and Taiwan (considered part of China), and support of French colonialism and efforts to spread democracy in Indochina.<sup>60</sup> Shu Guang Zhang

summarizes that “The problem was not that the United States and China had different cultures, but rather that each nation’s leaders ignored that fact.”<sup>61</sup>

More recently, China once again resorted to threats of force against Taiwan in 1995-1996 in order to deter the Taiwan independence movement. Believing that Taiwan’s President Lee Teng-hui would abandon the “One China” policy and declare independence, China launched a series of missiles into the waters near Taiwan in order to intimidate voters. The U.S. responded by deploying two Aircraft Carrier Strike Groups (CSG) to the Taiwan Strait. President Lee was reelected with a strong majority but did not declare independence.

Current tensions between China and the U.S. over the status of Taiwan appear to be slowly easing towards an eventual peaceful resolution. However, attention has shifted to potential for conflict in other areas. Chief among them, the South China Sea holds strategic significance to both the U.S. and China. Nearly 80% of China’s imported oil travels through the South China Sea.<sup>62</sup> China generally views the area as Chinese waters, control of which is commensurate with China’s position as an emerging great power. China views U.S. military activity in the South China Sea as interference with the exercise of Chinese sovereignty that strikes a nerve. Protection of the ideals of freedom of navigation, commerce, and democracy is at the core of American strategic culture. The U.S. views the South China Sea essentially as a global commons and is sensitive to the prospect of China bullying its neighbors and the U.S. out of the area. Additionally, the South China Sea is the commercial lifeline for several key U.S. allies and partners in the region such as Japan, Philippines, and South Korea. These countries pay close attention for signs that the U.S. is ceding regional security responsibilities to China.

Both China and the U.S. make international legal arguments regarding behavior in the South China Sea that not only support their respective national interests, but also reflect each nation's strategic culture. For example, China is a signatory to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As such, China interprets the document as supporting its right to defend Chinese sovereignty by prohibiting U.S. surveillance operations within the 200 nautical mile (NM) Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) without Chinese consent. Although the U.S. Congress has not ratified formal American agreement to UNCLOS, the U.S. interprets it as supporting the American ideal of international freedom of navigation by authorizing surveillance operations in the EEZ save for specific marine scientific research. Additionally, the U.S. operates under customary international law that allows for peacetime military operations in an EEZ provided it does not breach the 12 NM territorial waters of a country.<sup>63</sup>

China's conflicted strategic culture of justifying offensive force in the name of sovereignty and territory is manifest in its behavior in the South China Sea where observers generally agree that China continues to pursue a strategy to expand its sphere of influence. China has a history of periodic aggressive military activity to resolve territorial disputes in the area. In 1974 Chinese forces removed South Vietnamese troops from the Parcel Islands. In 1988 China fought a significant engagement with Vietnam over Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands resulting in the loss of three Vietnamese ships and 70 sailors. In 1995 China established outposts on the Philippine claimed Mischief Reef and expanded those facilities in 1998.<sup>64</sup>

Recent Chinese aggression in the South China Sea has not been limited to regional states. The U.S. has maintained a policy of neutrality regarding most

international claims in the South China Seas. However, America has also remained true to its conflicted strategic culture by maintaining a persistent military presence in the region in defense of interests and the ideal of international freedom of movement. In 2001 a Chinese fighter jet collided with a U.S. military reconnaissance aircraft it was harassing over the South China Sea resulting in the loss of the Chinese pilot and the emergency landing and subsequent exploitation of the U.S. aircraft. China held the U.S. crew for 10 days before releasing them.<sup>65</sup> In 2009 five Chinese ships harassed the U.S. Navy surveillance ship Impeccable in an attempt to interfere with the ship's operations and damage its equipment. The Impeccable is part of a small fleet of U.S. ships tasked with mapping the ocean floor near China's coast and submarine port facilities.<sup>66</sup> Strategic culture has helped to shape divergent views of China and America regarding "ownership" of the South China Sea. This divergence coupled with the significant day-to-day military presence maintained by both nations contributes to a complex security environment prone to potential miscalculation and unintended conflict.

#### Recommendations for U.S. Policy and Strategy

In the contemporary strategic environment, both China and the U.S. have evolved into dualistic strategic cultures. One is bound in the philosophical and historical pacifist traditions of its people and the other acknowledging the efficacy of the use of force commensurate with great power status. The respective internal struggles between these natures serve to justify when and how each nation uses force. China, torn between a pacifist temperament grounded in its Confucian spiritual roots, the influence of the "century of humiliation and shame", and a newfound economic and military vitality, uses offensive force justified as defense of its territorial integrity and national sovereignty. America, torn between its liberal pacifist roots and its unrivaled global

dominance, is sensitive to perceived threats to its great ideals as manifested in its position as world's most powerful nation. As a result, the U.S. also uses offensive force justified as defense of "universal" ideas.

U.S. policymakers should develop policy and strategy regarding China in the context of both nations' strategic cultures. As an emerging power, most observers agree that China will likely continue to expand its spheres of influence into the East China Sea, South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, and Indian Ocean. With this in mind, a few broad recommendations to help frame future policy might include the following.

First, policy makers should clearly define the line between legitimate Chinese defense of territory and expansionism leading to regional hegemony. China has demonstrated a tendency to successfully justify expansionist behavior as defensive in nature. The U.S. should always remain mindful of legitimate Chinese sensitivity to perceived foreign encroachment upon areas commonly agreed to be Chinese (i.e. "One China" policy regarding Taiwan), but should more vigorously highlight and respond to those occasions when China clearly attempts to expand beyond those areas using a defensive rationale. America should appeal to the Chinese strategic cultural yearning for "Just War" by undercutting any claim of offensive actions in the name of "defense" when it is clearly not. The U.S. should also highlight Chinese aggression when it appears to be focused on securing material objectives such as land or natural resources, as this is contrary to the Confucian philosophical nature or legitimate war aims.

For example, any future aggressive Chinese behavior in the Spratly Islands should be initially met by a swift and sustained international information campaign

highlighting China's unjustified use of force aimed solely at expanding its territory and securing new material resources. This campaign must include Chinese audiences to the greatest extent possible. The objective is a loud world consensus in the face of unjust aggression that erodes the moral legitimacy of Chinese leaders in the eyes of the Chinese people. America should not immediately pursue a military response as it would likely have the opposite effect and should be reserved as a last resort in accordance with U.S. strategic culture. Broadly speaking, the U.S. and its regional partners must take control of the narrative and as an example, make it clear that despite its name the South China Sea is not Chinese waters.

The U.S. should never underestimate the impact of the “century of humiliation and shame” on the Chinese psyche. America and Japan played central roles in this period of exploitation. The U.S. views Japan as the nation it defeated, helped to rebuild, and is now a passive but important ally. China views Japan through the lens of the “Rape of Nanking” and a long history of Sino-Japanese hostilities. China does not subscribe to the new reality of Japan as a pacifist nation. U.S. policymakers should consider this in every instance when developing coalitions to either confront or partner with China. The U.S. generally views strong Japanese support as a net positive when attempting to present a united front and deter Chinese regional aggression. There are occasions when Japanese support has the opposite effect on China. The U.S. should judiciously enlist overt Japanese support when dealing with China while continuing to reassure Japan regarding the importance of its partnership with America.

Additionally, the “century of humiliation and shame” feeds China's paranoia regarding territorial sovereignty and foreign incursion. The U.S. should carefully gauge



the pace and intensity of military operations in close proximity to mainland China. It should start with U.S. surveillance in the EEZ of China's mainland. These operations are clearly a significant irritant to China, feeding an already robust Chinese nationalist paranoia regarding territorial integrity, and creating countless opportunities for miscalculation or accidental conflict. This is not to suggest completely ending those operations, as regional partners would likely interpret that as the U.S. ceding its right to operate there and a sure sign of U.S. withdrawal from its regional security responsibilities. However, a thoughtful review of the scale and scope of U.S. operations would likely reduce tensions without yielding any significant military advantage if crisis occurs. This is especially effective if done in conjunction with the first policy recommendation.

Finally, America should seek to humanize itself in the eyes of China. China's strategic cultural image of the U.S. includes an American "worship" of technology as more valuable than the human element. U.S. behavior often serves to reinforce this notion. When faced with either crisis or engagement with China, the U.S. generally leads with technology like aircraft carriers, advanced fighter jets, and business or space technologies. Ironically, American culture generally, and U.S. military specifically, has always fostered a culture featuring the individual or human element over technology. America should seek to highlight brilliant individuals who are diplomats, warriors, scientists, and business professionals and downplay reliance on technology. In short, America needs to start changing the typical Chinese image of an American from the Wizard of Oz (small man behind big machine) to Rodin's "The Thinker". This is especially true in the military to military interactions that periodically take place with

China. Certainly the human centric nature of the recent U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan provide notable examples of the value placed by the U.S. military on the human element of war. Humanizing America seeks to highlight the similarities and downplay the differences between the respective strategic cultures and forces China to collectively reconsider its strategic cultural assumptions.

The history of mutual U.S. and Chinese strategic cultural understanding is not a good one. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century was marked by demonstrations of the strategic cultural ignorance of both nations resulting in direct armed conflict or proxy war between the two powers. As both the complexity of the contemporary strategic environment and the military power of each nation continue to grow, the potential for future conflict with catastrophic consequences is unmistakable. It is naïve to rely solely on the belief that the significant economic interdependence of both countries will preclude armed conflict. A more comprehensive understanding of how each country approaches the decision to use force can only serve to mitigate the potential for future war between the world's top powers.

### Endnotes

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